

IS AMERICA DECADENT?

by Russell Kirk

Dr. Kirk, renowned author and nationally syndicated columnist, delivered this address before Hillsdale College students and faculty during the second seminar of the Center for Constructive Alternatives titled, "The Roots of American Order."

At Kansas City, early in the summer of 1971, President Richard Nixon talked informally to publishers, editors, and broadcasters about decadence. Great civilizations, he said, tend to sink into moral confusion once they have grown rich. They lose their vigor, their purpose, their end: by definition, they have become decadent. "The United States," he went on, "is now reaching that period."

According to C.E.M. Joad, "decadence" is the loss of an object in existence. Have these United States—or rather, the people of this country—lost the sense of what makes life worth living? Mr. Nixon was the first president of these United States to suggest, in public, that American character and American institutions are seriously decayed. He then argued that only a strong reaffirmation of moral purpose, and able ethical leadership from the molders of public opinion, could renew America's promise. A year later, the coils of Watergate began to close round him.

As I read Mr. Nixon's remarks, in 1971, there came into my head a passage from Livy—from the historian Titus Livius, who wrote only a few years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. You can find this passage quoted in a book by the president of Hillsdale College, *Legacy of Freedom*.

"I hope my passion for Rome's past does not impair my judgment," Livy wrote, "for I honestly believe that no country has ever been greater or purer than ours, or richer in good citizens and noble deeds. None has ever been free for so many generations from the vices of avarice and luxury; nowhere have thrift and plain living for so long been held in esteem. Indeed, with us poverty went hand in hand with contentment."

Livy was describing the early Roman Republic; but he might have been describing the early American Republic (allowing some license for panegyric in both commonwealths). "Of late years," Livy continued, "wealth has made us greedy, and self-indulgence has brought us, through every form of sensual excess, to be—if I may so put it—in love with death, both individual and collective." It was not Freud who discovered the death-wish.

"But the study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind," Livy told the Romans of his age, "for in history you have a record of the infinite variety of human experience plainly set out for all to see; and in that record you can find for yourself and your country both examples and warnings: fine things to take as models; base things, rotten through and through, to avoid."

im·primis (im·pri' mīs) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things). . .

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The Roman system endured, after a fashion, some four centuries after Livy's death; but it was not the Republic Livy had loved, endowed with the high old Roman virtue. We still will be the richest of all nations some years from now, Mr. Nixon told the publicists; but "the critical question is whether the United States will be a healthy nation in terms of its moral strength."

May American vitality triumph once more over negation and apathy? If that vitality is permanently impaired—why, in Eliot's famous line, "Here we go round the prickly pear,/ At five o'clock in the morning"—hollow men, blown about by every wind of doctrine in Death's Other Kingdom.

Thus far, the official national celebration of our Bicentenary has not triumphed over negation and apathy. Mr. Richard Gibbs, formerly executive director of North Carolina's Bicentennial Commission, has criticized mordantly the feebleness of America's national effort at commemoration of the founding of this Republic. And Mr. Gibbs knows what ought to be done.

"What is needed, of course, is a Bicentennial commemoration based on a comprehensive and historically reputable view of the American Revolution *in toto*," he writes, "not as truncated for academic or other purposes. Beyond that, we also need a concept of commemoration itself capable of inspiring and embracing activities on a plane considerably above hedonism and self-congratulation and free rides on the *earned* reputations of ancestors. In short, we are in need of an activist commemorative concept, based on a true and full history of the American Revolution, which will enable us not only to understand and celebrate our heritage and our present unparalleled circumstances of liberty and prosperity, but also through the conscious application of the founding ideals and principles to make an extraordinary contribution of our own to the continuing vitality of that heritage."

Amen to that. Decadence is a state of mind; belief is nearly everything. President Nixon fell to his ruin, but the Republic need not decay irreparably. If the American people believe the prophets of doom, then those prophecies will work their own fulfillment; men and women, accepting what they take to be fated, will cease to struggle against adversity. But if many people continue to have hope—why, then there remains strong hope for us all. That being so, people take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing, end them. Belief is nearly everything.

A primary purpose of this week-long session of the Center for Constructive Alternatives is to

renew our hopes: to examine the roots of our moral and our social order, as a preparation, during our celebration of the Bicentenary (which, I remind you, is supposed to be commemorated right through the year 1989), for watering and spading round those roots. As Livy knew, history is no mere antiquarian exercise; rather, history informs us about the character of the permanent things. And the more closely we study the roots of our order, the more we understand how deep those roots grow, the better we will apprehend that our order deserves renewal, and the more hope for reinvigoration will hearten us.



Most of my colleagues in this CCA will concern themselves with institutions: with roots of political and social order. Permit me, then, to say first something about the roots of our *moral* order. For the order of the soul and the order of the commonwealth are closely intertwined; one cannot thrive if the other is sick. And as Tocqueville tells us, the real strength of the American democracy is to be found not in favorable circumstances, not even in good laws, but instead in America's *mores*—that is, in moral beliefs and customs.

This point was made convincingly about two years ago by a distinguished American professor of political science, Dr. René de Visme Williamson, of Louisiana State University. Our freedom and our justice and our order, he told an audience at Davidson College, depend upon reverence.

"It is my contention that reverence is the root of obedience to and respect for constituted authority," said Professor Williamson, "of decent and civilized dissent, of being a member of an opposition which is loyal and constructive instead of destructive or subversive, of regarding nature as God's handiwork to be tended and preserved rather than something to be exploited and desecrated."

Dr. Williamson offered examples. "You may recall," he continued, "that when Dwight Eisenhower was first inaugurated as President, he closed his inaugural address with a prayer of his own making. One of my colleagues in the psychology department commented unfavorably on this incident, saying that anyone who was so unsure of himself as to require a spiritual crutch is unfit to be President of the United States.

"My reply was: just the opposite. Beware of the man who is so cocksure that he thinks he can solve all problems with his own resources. I do not conclude from my reply that Eisenhower was a good president, and I do not regret voting against him. The lesson to be drawn is that reverence by itself does not guarantee statesmanship, but that there can be no statesmanship without reverence."

Just so. Dr. Philip Phenix, one of this country's leading writers on educational theory, says that the whole curriculum of any public school should be suffused with reverence. So it is with the American Republic.

"I realize that the Christian faith does not guarantee political wisdom," Professor Williamson went on. "The many unfortunate and misguided pronouncements of the World Council of Churches, and of our own General Assembly [Dr. Williamson being a Presbyterian] testify to that fact.

"That is not, of course, a reason why the Church should always be silent with regard to politics. Of this much I am sure, however, and that is that both the Christian faith and the national interest are enhanced by the presence of dedicated Christians in public office. By supplying the nation with such Christians, the college can help to set the tone of politics on a high level, and, in the words of Edmund Burke, make sure that public officials 'should not look to the

paltry pelf of the moment, nor to the temporary and transient praise of the vulgar. . .'"

Aye, ours is a nation *under God*, as the twentieth century enlargement of the Pledge of Allegiance puts it. No one has emphasized that truth more strongly than did Orestes Brownson.

The political order rests upon the moral order, Brownson wrote many times. And the Americans, like every other great people, are meant by Providence to accomplish a special work, mission, or destiny. The American Republic, he declared in 1866, has the providential mission of reconciling liberty with law.

Yet America's mission, he added, "is not so much the realization of liberty as the realization of the true idea of the state, which secures at once the authority of the public and the freedom of the individual—the sovereignty of the people without social despotism, and individual freedom without anarchy. In other words, its mission is to bring out in its life the dialectic union of authority and liberty, of the natural rights of man and those of society. The Greek and Roman Republics asserted the state to the detriment of individual freedom; modern republics either do the same, or assert individual freedom to the detriment of the state. The American Republic has been instituted by Providence to realize the freedom of each with advantage to the other."

This still is America's mission. If we fail to maintain the healthy tension between the claims of order and the claims of freedom which has been our principal political achievement, we will be decadent. I do not mean that by some incantation we can resurrect from the dust the men and the measures of 1787, say. Yet it lies within the realm of possibility that, given hope and prudence, informed by belief, we may enter upon an American Augustan age.

A century ago, when Brownson wrote, these United States were not ready for an Augustan age. Territorial and economic expansion were too much with the majority of the American people. But in this year of our Lord 1975, America seems to have arrived at its maximum extent, its maximum population (or nearly that), and its height of political, military, and economic power. We Americans, like the Romans in the age of Augustus, must make irrevocable choices. At that time, Rome needed to renew the idea and the reality of three Latin words that Vergil emphasizes: of *labor*, of *pietas*, of *fatum*. *Labor* signifies work, of course, particularly the cultivation and the conservation of the land. *Pietas* means more than our English word piety: it signifies also that reverence

of which Professor Williamson spoke, and it signifies what we call "patriotism," and it means a respect for the contract of immortal society that joins the dead, the living, and those yet unborn. *Fatum* means mission, or destiny: the object or end for which a nation exists. The Romans had either to give flesh to these things, or else to sink prematurely into private and public disorder, internal violence, and disaster on the frontiers.



Just so is it with us Americans now. Either we become Augustans during the next decade, perhaps, or else we fail as a people, with swift and dreadful consequences.

Certain outward parallels between the age of Caesar Augustus and our age are obvious enough. Let us consider briefly two of these: the need for the maintenance of peace, and the need for administrative reform.

The fundamental purpose of the state is the keeping of the peace. This has two aspects: the

defense of the country, and the enforcement of justice. The Emperor Augustus succeeded in both. Can we so succeed?

For the keeping of peace in the world, America at the end of the Second World War was as strong as Rome had been after the defeat of Antony. In part, we Americans let slip our opportunity, and now Russia and China approach us in power. Yet our strength remains greater than that of either of these totalist dominations; and we aspire to wielding the balance of power. If we become so skillful in that art as the British were during the nineteenth century, then wars may be local, brief, and settled by diplomacy. It is not too much to think of a *Pax Americana*; the alternative is almost unthinkable.

Within this country, we confront the necessity for the recovery of true community—as contrasted with the drift of recent decades toward a heavy centralization which nevertheless cannot maintain order tolerably. Here, too, we need an Augustan touch. At least we have begun to think about such concerns.

Such grand undertakings are the work of statesmen, chiefly—of statesmen with Augustan talents, let us hope. But also, and still more important, we require the poet's vision of Augustan times. I do not know whether we will find a Vergil for our dawning age—though T.S. Eliot and Robert Frost were Vergil's heirs. However that may be, surely we can apply Vergil's concepts *labor* and *pietas* and *fatum* to our own troubled era.

First, this word *labor*. The swift diminishing of our American sources of energy, and the waste or neglect of much of our arable land, now are apparent to most of us. Vergil called for a renewal of the land, and of rural life, ravaged by decades of civil strife; we are summoned to make amends for our own economic wantonness. George Santayana wrote about 1913 that the American liberals had subordinated quality to quantity—in economic life, as in other matters. Now, Santayana remarked, the liberal philanthropists are preparing "an absolute subjection of the individual, in soul and body, to the instincts of the majority — the most cruel and unprogressive of masters; and I am not sure that the liberal maxim 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' has not lost whatever was just or generous in its intent and come to mean the greatest idleness of the largest possible population."

But work, as Orestes Brownson said often, is good, not evil. The recovery of work with purpose; work which is qualitative as quantitative; especially work on the land, which seems to be regaining

its place in the balance of the American economy—these concerns are as pressing for us as were similar concerns in the age of Augustus. We must emancipate ourselves from the delusion of the greatest idleness for the largest possible population. And this is an undertaking for many Americans, working singly and in concert—not for public men only.

Second, this word *pietas*. It implies “reverence,” a concept thoroughly neglected in most American schools for most of this century: reverence for the divine, reverence for the soul, reverence for our cultural inheritance. It implies “concern”: concern for our family, our home, our little community, our country, and for those who will come after us in this land. It implies “duty”: moral obligations to our fellows and to our commonwealth. It implies what Edmund Burke called “the contract of eternal society”—the community of souls. It involves also that sort of patriotism which Burke had in mind when he declared, “For us to love our country, our country ought to be lovely.”

Unless we renew the concept and practice of *pietas* in our time, things will fall apart. If a people forget *pietas*, they become a proletariat—which for a while, although only for a while, may remain a proletariat sufficiently fed and lodged. “Proletariat” is an ugly word for an ugly thing. Augustus knew only too well what it meant. It means a mass of people without responsibilities, without loyalties, without faith, without property, without community, without hope. A proletariat lives by bread and circuses, at public expense. When bored, a proletariat becomes dangerous. Mere welfare appropriations will not redeem a proletariat; the work of reclaiming is far more subtle than that. When most people cease to be pious, in the Roman sense of that abused word, the civil social order no longer can cohere. So for us in the twentieth century, *pietas* is no antiquarian abstraction.

Third, this word *fatum*. What is America’s mission in our age? It remains, as Brownson put it, to reconcile liberty with law. The great grim tendency of our world is otherwise: sometimes toward anarchy, but more commonly toward the total state, whose alleged benefits delude. This is no easy mission, even at home: consider how many people who demand an enlargement of civil liberties at the same time vote for vast increase of the functions and powers of the general government.

At home, this mission is difficult enough. But our mission is harder still in another respect: the example of the United States to the world. If we are to know a Pax Americana, it will not be the sort of American hegemony that was attempted

by Presidents Truman and Eisenhower and Kennedy and Johnson: not a patronizing endeavor, through gifts of money and of arms, to cajole or intimidate all the nations of the earth into submitting themselves to a vague overwhelming Americanization, obliterating other cultures and political patterns. An enduring Pax Americana would be contrived not by bribing and boasting, but by quiet strength—and especially by setting an example of ordered freedom that might be emulated. Tacitus wrote that the Romans created a wilderness, and called it peace. We may aspire to bring peace, but to encourage other peoples to cultivate their own gardens: in that respect, to better the Augustan model.

So much for Vergilian precepts. If I have suggested to you that the Augustan Age deserves serious attention—why, I have accomplished what I essayed. Either, in the dawning years, we will know Augustan ways, or else we will find ourselves in a different Roman era revived. This might be the age of the merciless old Emperor Septimius Severus. As Septimius lay dying at York, after his last campaign, there came to his bedside his two brutal sons, Geta and Caracalla, asking their father how they should contrive to rule the world once he was gone. “Be of one mind,” Septimius said. “Enrich the soldiers; nothing else matters.”

Great empires and little minds, in Burke’s phrase, ill consist. America is an imperial republic now, whether we like it or not. I pray that some of the rising generation may cultivate imperial intellects and imperial consciences, of the Augustan sort. For only so will these United States remain a republic; and only so will the order of the soul survive outside holes and corners.

Our word “order” implies harmony. In the order of the soul, it means harmony of reason, will, and appetite, and participation in the eternal. In the order of the commonwealth, it means the harmonious arrangement of classes and functions and rewards which gives willing consent to law and ensures that we shall all be safe together.

Decadence, the loss of an object, always brings on disorder, private and public: that is, decadence destroys harmony. Is this nation decadent, in the year of our Lord 1975? The answer to that inquiry depends upon what belief, or what lack of belief, prevails among the better minds and consciences of the American people—upon what response they make to our present conundrums.

If the American people have slipped away from their old order, one necessity is to analyze what that order used to be. For Americans in the dawn-

ing age who believe in an enduring order, the way of affirmation may be hard enough. There is no tyranny more pervasive or difficult to escape, says Tocqueville, than the 'democratic despotism' of dominant opinions. If American government and society are secularized and coarsened increasingly—if, more and more, the policy of the political state is to break down the moral order, substituting for it compulsions at law—then some Americans must survive like Jonah in the whale.

Such is the strategy of last resort. But it

remains possible that modern America may work a renewal of spirit and of institutions. The revolutionary of this century, the ideologue of disorder, marches with his dupes at his heels—straight into the madhouse; and the gates clang shut behind him. Yet if we understand the principles of order, we may be able to renew. Then it may not be said of our civilization what has been said of so many others that lost their knowledge of order: "And that house fell, and great was the fall of that house."

Struggle for Independence Continues

Hillsdale College's refusal to comply with the Department of Health, Education and Welfare's revised interpretation of regulations has produced a widespread reaction throughout the nation. Stories taking up the Hillsdale battle have originated in such sources as *Time*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Daily News*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, the AP wire service, syndicated columnists, and Milton Friedman's commentary on the CBS morning news.

While HEW has not responded to Hillsdale College's non-compliance, a number of congressmen have stated that they believe HEW has clearly overstepped its bounds in attempting to force its new interpretation of regulations on the college.

HEW has now deemed all schools "recipient institutions" which have on their campuses any students who as individuals receive veterans' benefits, government loans or scholarships. And "recipient institutions" are required to comply with the myriad regulations governing hiring, admission, and compilation of information on all those associated with the college in any way. These regulations previously affected only those institutions which accepted government funding for their operations. Hillsdale College does not, and never has, accepted such funding.

Should the government decide to withhold the funding which now goes to these individual students, about 100 who now attend Hillsdale, the loss to the college would be \$250,000 per year. So to provide the scholarship money for these students, and to insure Hillsdale's future independence from government regulation and control, the trustees of the college have launched an aggressive campaign to raise \$25 million for an endowment.

We at Hillsdale sincerely thank those many individuals who have given the college their continuing support. We particularly appreciate the recent gifts of so many who have joined our efforts to insure our independence.

One other way you can be of assistance at this point is to help us share the Hillsdale story with others who share your concerns. A brochure is presently being prepared explaining the conflict with HEW and the struggle of independence we now face. We would be happy to send information on Hillsdale College and IMPRIMIS to those individuals you suggest to us. If you would like to receive more information yourself, let us know.

The real issue at stake is not only the fate of Hillsdale College as an independent institution. It is the very question of whether the private sector will be allowed to survive in any form whatsoever. The battle which we now face is one for individual liberty for all of us.